

## Public Trust and Confidence

### Introduction

- It seems that every television network today airs shows about the justice system. These shows are some of the most popular programs on television:
  - Judge Judy, who openly tells the people before her *exactly* how she feels about them.
  - “The Practice,” and “Law and Order,” with courtroom drama that always seems to end neatly by the end of the hour.
  - Not to mention the old favorites of the 60s and 70s, complete with the last-minute confessions that cause us to gasp from the edge of our seats.
- But no matter how hard we look, we would be hard-pressed to find a courtroom in MN that operated like that of Judge Judy or of other television judges.
- More and more, the media and popular culture define the courts to society. That has an impact on people’s perspective of the Third Branch of government – the Judicial Branch.

### Strategies and priorities

- MN’s Judicial Branch is committed to changing these often incorrect perceptions and building the public’s trust and confidence in the court system.
- “Public Trust and Confidence” is one of four strategic priorities on which the Judicial Branch is focusing. The other priorities include:
  - Making better use of technology,
  - Reforming the way we help maltreated children, and
  - Making the judicial system more accessible to all people.

### The statistics

- But before we can begin to change the stereotypes and perspectives promoted by television, we must understand what people truly think about the Judicial Branch.
- In 1999 and 2000, we asked 1,100 Minnesotans how they felt about the judiciary. Here’s what they said:
  - Statewide, about three-quarters of the respondents said they have trust and confidence in the court system.
  - Generally, Minnesotans believe that the courts protect people’s constitutional rights. Most respondents also said they believe that judges treat people with respect and that judges are fair when they decide cases.
  - Respondents also said they believe that the people who work for the courts are helpful and courteous.
- Some of the results, however, remind us that we still have some work to do:

- Survey respondents said that the courts are least capable of handling family-related issues, such as juvenile cases, child protection cases and family relations cases.
- And all respondents, particularly respondents of color, said they are less likely to believe that the courts treat the following groups fairly:
  - Native Americans
  - African Americans
  - Hispanics
  - Non-English speaking people
  - Poor people
- However, possibly most telling of all of the responses we received, 40 percent of those who took the survey said they knew little or nothing about the court system. Even more of the respondents of color claimed they knew little or nothing about the court system.

### **The solutions**

- These statistics tell us that a little public education about what the court system does will go a long way in building your trust and confidence in the work that we do. The Judicial Branch cannot be effective if you don't trust us to provide justice and to peacefully resolve your disputes.
- We've already taken steps to improve the public's trust and confidence in the MN Judicial Branch.
- Statewide, judges and court staff are making more of an effort to interact with organizations within MN's communities of color and the greater community. For example, in 2002, the courts sponsored a criminal justice forum with the St. Paul Asian community to discuss how the system and communities of color can better work together.
- Our Jury Reform Task Force, which has recommended improvements to jury trial procedures. It will also work to improve the way we treat jurors before, during and following trials.
- We're working with a "plain English" expert to make our family court forms easier to understand. And we're developing videos to help litigants through the family court process.
- In addition, we continue to make the elimination of race bias in our courts a top priority through the work of the Race Fairness Implementation Committee and our new initiative to collect race data statewide. Since early 2002, every court in MN has collected self-reported race data at the first court appearance in traffic, criminal and juvenile cases. The goal is to understand whether or not bias enters into decisions made in the criminal justice system and to address those problems, so everyone is treated fairly.

- Judicial Branch outreach programs reached more than 40,000 people in 2001-02, in addition to citizens who met with judges during individual visits to schools and service organizations across the state.
  - Judges and judicial employees participate in mock trials, courthouse visits and other activities.
  - On the third annual Minnesota Constitution Day (October 2002), judges and attorneys taught more than 11,000 MN students about the court system and discussed issues related to the Constitution.
- Finally, we are making better use of the Internet to inform the public about the Judicial Branch and provide court forms, attorney registration information and the Minnesota Rules of Court online. I invite you to visit our web site at [www.mncourts.gov](http://www.mncourts.gov).

### Conclusion

- And last, but certainly not least, my colleagues and I feel it important to have the kinds of conversations like we're having today. The Judicial Branch is one-third of your government. We want to hear from you and will do what we can to make you feel confident in our abilities to assure justice and peacefully resolve your disputes.

### Q&A